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COMMON SENSE PRECAUTIONS ADVISED FOR HUNTERS IN AREA OF RECENT ANTHRAX OUTBREAK

With the recent deaths of nearly 300 domestic bison and some free-ranging wildlife caused by naturally occurring anthrax bacteria in southwestern Montana, some hunters have expressed concern about pursuing game in the affected area.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and Department of Public Health and Human Services officials want all hunters to understand that while human anthrax cases are extremely rare, normal precautions should be taken by hunters.

"Anthrax is caused by a naturally occurring bacteria that can lie dormant in the ground for decades, then become active under ideal soil and weather conditions," said FWP spokesman Ron Aasheim, in Helena. "It's a seasonal disease, occurring in late summer during periods of prolonged hot, dry weather after flooding or heavy rains. This summer it has been particularly active in a localized area with the confirmed domestic bison deaths in portions of Gallatin and Madison counties in southwestern Montana. In addition, anthrax has been confirmed in the deaths of white tailed deer and elk and is suspected in the death of a black bear in the vicinity of the outbreak."

Aasheim said the affected area is on private and adjacent Gallatin National Forest lands in the north portion of hunting district 311. The area encompasses the Cherry Creek, Spanish Creek, and Elk Creek drainages, from the Spanish Peaks north to U.S. Highway 84.

Aasheim noted that not all wildlife will show obvious signs of being sick during the pursuit, field dressing, skinning or butchering process.

"The risk of a hunter being infected with anthrax is very low," said Dr. Kammy Johnson at the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services. "The small risk can be further minimized by taking common sense precautions that all hunters should follow.

Those precautions include:

- Do not harvest animals that appear ill or are acting abnormally.
- Wear rubber (latex) gloves when field dressing game
- Minimize contact with animal fluids, brain and spinal tissues.

- Wash hands and instruments thoroughly after field dressing or processing.
- Cook all meat until well done before consuming.

"All hunters should adopt these precautions wherever and whenever they are hunting," Johnson said.

As the outbreak appears to be ongoing, Aasheim said hunters who are concerned about even the minimal risk of exposure may want to choose a different area to hunt until cold weather arrives or snow covers the ground.

For more information hunters, taxidermists and meat processors can, visit the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services web site at dphhs.mt.gov. Click "Precautions for Hunters," listed under "Featured Topics." Individuals may also call the DPHHS at 406-444-0273.